The
Thoreau Society Bulletin

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Thoreau's Birthplace

Joseph Valentine

During the early evening of May 26, 1995, James Breen set out for a short walk across the open fields and meadows of his small Virginia Road farm. He had worked this land for the better part of 80 years and knew every inch of it. As he stood by the edge of his cornfield looking toward the old farmhouse in which he was born, he fell to the ground–his life suddenly over. Breen's passing marked the end of a long succession of farmers and tenants who worked and lived on this extraordinary farm. It also heralded the beginning of yet another struggle to preserve land that was important to Henry David Thoreau.

In a conversation with Concord writer Louise Fadiman only a few weeks before his death, Breen revealed what may have been a premonition of his own fate. In an effort to get him to sign a release for a photo that she would eventually include in her book *The Concord Experience*, Fadiman followed Breen around his farm as he persisted in his work. Once he finally stood still long enough to acknowledge her mission, he agreed to the release on the condition that she would "tell in her book" that *he* was the owner of the farm. She agreed and, as a way of thanking him, promised to hand deliver a copy of her book once it was printed. " I may not be here then," Breen said. "Of course you will," Fadiman replied, "I'll bring you one." "No," said Breen, "I may not be here."[1]

At the time of James Breen's death, his 18 acre farm was a mere remnant of the original 17th century Wheeler and 18th century Minott farms. Yet he was always very proud of what he had accomplished with the place. And even though he insisted that it be known as *his* farm, he was well aware of the important links it had with the past, especially as the place where Thoreau first saw the light of day in "the easternmost upper chambers" of the farmhouse.

Pride of ownership and sense of place were traits Breen shared with his father. In a 1931 article published in the *Bookman*, a visitor to the farm talks about his encounter with James Breen, Sr.:

> Then we walked out on the Virginia Road to the house in which Thoreau was born. We had been told that the owner was hard to approach, but James Breen was an amiable enough man, a widower, living alone with his son and still working the farm belonging to the house. Mr. Breen showed us every board and beam and hand-made nail in the place. Curiosity seekers did not get here often. Some antique dealer had been through and bought a section of the hand-made staircase. A staircase of his own making suited Mr. Breen just as well. Financial conditions were not so good now.[2]

In better times, rich farmland and orchards lined Virginia Road, one of the oldest byways into Concord. Much of this land was originally owned by Sgt. Thomas Wheeler (1625–1704), who subsequently conveyed a large parcel to his sons John (1655–1736) and Timothy (1667–1718). It was on John Wheeler's portion of this land that Thoreau's birthplace was built sometime between 1720 and 1740.

In 1755 John Wheeler's heirs sold the farm to Samuel Minott, a cousin who lived near Meriam's Corner in Concord. Samuel, in turn, gave the property "for love and affection" to his son Jonas, who was to figure prominently in the events of April 19, 1775. Captain Jonas Minott died in 1813 and left his wife Mary her "widow's third" of the estate. At the time of her marriage to Capt. Minott, Mary already had several children by her previous marriage to Reverend Asa Dunbar. The youngest child, Cynthia, grew up on

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The Thoreau Society Bulletin is published quarterly by The Thoreau Society.

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The Thoreau Society, Inc. is an international not-for-profit organization founded to stimulate interest in the life, works and philosophy of Henry David Thoreau.

To fulfill its mission, the Society:

- conducts an educational and public outreach program in collaboration with the Concord Museum in Concord, (508) 369-9763. Please call the Museum's Director of Education, Jayne Gordon, to schedule a presentation.
- owns and operates The Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond, a visitor's center with a bookstore and gift shop. The Shop is located at the Walden Pond State Reservation.
- operates and develops programming for The Thoreau Institute, in partnership with the Isis Fund/Walden Woods Project.
- sponsors various Thoreau-related educational programs and excursions throughout the year.

Membership in the Society includes subscriptions to its two publications, *The Concord Saunterer* (published each Autumn) and *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* (published quarterly). Society members receive a 10% discount on all merchandise purchased from The Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond and advance notice about Society programs, including the Annual Meeting held in Concord each July. Contact The Thoreau Society administrative offices in Lincoln, Massachusetts for membership information.

The Thoreau Society Directory

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Inquiries about merchandise (including books and mail-order items) should be directed to Stephanie Kornfeld, Merchandise Manager, The Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond, 915 Walden Street, Concord, MA 01742-4511, U.S.A.; tel: (508)287-5477; fax: (508)287-5620; e-mail: tsshop@aol.com.

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The Thoreau Society Bulletin is edited by Bradley P. Dean and Debra A. Caton.

the Virginia Road farm and in the Spring of 1812 married John Thoreau.

In the early years of his marriage, John Thoreau had limited success as a storekeeper. At the time of son Henry's birth in 1817, he found himself tilling the fields of the Minott farm in order to make ends meet. Times only got tougher for the Thoreaus. Finally, when Henry was only eight months old, the family was forced to give up the farm and move into the village. In the Fall of 1818, the farmhouse and remaining thirty or so acres were sold at auction.

Henry Thoreau developed a great affection for the house in which he was born and where his mother spent much of her youth. He referred to it and the surrounding land several times in his writings. He once described the house itself as "not standing but seated on its hinder parts in the attitude of strength and repose, bearing the sky on its broad shoulders like Atlas."[3]

Thoreau's friend and first biographer Ellery Channing wrote about the farmhouse, fields, and Thoreau's fortune to be born there:

> ...a perfect piece of our New England style of building, with its gray, unpainted boards, its grassy, unfenced dooryard. The house is somewhat isolated and remote from thoroughfares; the Virginia road, an old-fashioned, winding, at-length deserted pathway, the more smiling for its forked orchards, tumbling walls and mossy banks. About the house are pleasant, sunny meadows, deep with their beds of peat, so cheering with its homely, hearth-like fragrance; and in front runs a constant stream through the center of that great tract sometimes called Bedford levels,'–this brook, a source of the Shawsheen River. It was lovely he should draw his first breath in pure country air, out of crowded towns, amid the pleasant russet fields.[4]

Over much of the middle part of the nineteenth century, the farm was occupied by a succession of owners that included Colburn Hadlock–pig farmer, owner of the Middlesex Hotel and an early practitioner of recycling. Hadlock kept pigs on the farm and would feed them all the refuse from his hotel in town. Apparently he was less efficient at disposing of litter. There were so many pieces of broken dishes strewn about that, following a walk over the property, Thoreau christened it "Crockery Field."

In the Winter of 1878, the farmhouse minus a part of the sloping rear roof was placed on runners and moved a short distance down Virginia Road, where it has rested ever since. A newer farmhouse was built on its original location. By 1886, the farm belonged to Peter Peterson, one of several Scandinavian farmers who settled in the east quarter of Concord. In 1910 the property was sold to the Breen family.

Henry Thoreau developed a great affection for the house in which he was born and where his mother spent much of her youth. He referred to it and the surrounding land several times in his writings. He once described the house itself as "not standing but seated on its hinder parts in the attitude of strength and repose, bearing the sky on its broad shoulders like Atlas."[3]

We will never know exactly why James Breen dissuaded Louise Fadiman from returning with a copy of her book. If he had any pressing concerns about his health, he made no attempt to put his estate in order. He died without a will. So now the "machinery" of the Middlesex County Court must decide how to divide the property among his widow and two children. The land on which the house sits represents some of the last bit of farmland on Virginia Road and perhaps some of the oldest, continuously farmed land in the country.

In 1888, Margaret Sidney referred to Virginia Road as a "road run riot." In describing the series of curves, winding in and out among the fields, she says:

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> And whoever drives down its alder and birch-bordered length, or knows its beauty enough to prefer a walk through it, feels at once as frolicsome and carefree as the way-faring itself. It suggests the antics of a lamb, or the fresh joyousness of a child, with his hands full of daisies, in a sweet English lane.[5]

Virginia Road is still a road run riot. However, gone are most of the alder and birch borders. Instead of invoking images of a playful lamb, heavy equipment comes to mind as the road runs through subdivisions, corporate office parks, and a huge airfield. This area of Concord has been hit hard by development over the past ten years. And with the proposed privatization of Hanscom Airfield, it could get worse. Yet those who have had the chance to visit Thoreau's birthsite, which sits demurely among all this progress, talk about the special power of the place. Although the house and outbuildings are in need of repair, behind them the fertile fields, meadows and young woods are intact. Elm Brook traverses the eastern half of the property. Together the house and land make a respectable monument to Concord's poet-naturalist.

This Spring, it is likely that the courts will make a decision on how to distribute James Breen's estate. The family has decided to sell both the house and land, and developers are already bidding on the property. As warmer weather begins to soften the soil, they will finally be able to perform the ground water tests they'll need to help them determine exactly how many "traditional contemporary" houses they'll be able to squeeze onto the 18.4 acres.

Because the land is currently zoned as agricultural, once an actual offer is made on the property, the Town of Concord has 120 days to match the price. It is unlikely that the town will be able to pick up what is estimated to be a $1 to $1.5 million tab. This is land close to Boston and it's pricey. Realizing that a local initiative may be the only way to save this important piece of property, several Concord citizens have formed a non-profit organization and have recently mounted an educational and fundraising campaign. This group, spearheaded by Virginia Road resident Doris Smith, hopes to raise enough seed money to prove to foundations and other potential benefactors that the public wants to see Thoreau's birthplace preserved.

Today, James Breen's fields are no longer being tilled. The farmhouse where Thoreau drew his first breath of country air sits empty and abandoned. For over 300 years this farm has withstood the American experiment. It has patiently granted us our border disputes, forgiven our ecological blunders, and even nurtured us during our wars. That the fate of this historic and treasured place should now be so closely bound by the passage of time seems somehow an unjust re-payment. Yet its very survival is measured by each tick of the clock. During the early evening of May 26, 1857–the very same day in May that James Breen died–Thoreau made the following entry in his Journal:

> My mother was telling me to-night of the sounds which she used to hear summer nights when she was young and lived on Virginia Road. The lowing of cows or cackling of geese or the beating of a distant drum, but above all Joe Meriam whistling to his team, for he was an admirable whistler. She says she used to get up at midnight and go and sit on the doorstep when all in the house were asleep and she could hear nothing in the world but the ticking of the clock in the house behind her.[6]

For more information, contact: Save the Thoreau Birthplace Foundation, Inc., P.O. Box 14, Concord, MA 01742-0014

Notes

[1] Louise Fadiman, "Let Us Save the Thoreau Birthplace," *The Concord Journal*, 11 January 1996.

[2] Robert Whitcomb, "The Thoreau 'Country,'" *Bookman*, July 1931 p. 401.

[3] Quote attributed to Thoreau by Thomas Blanding in: "A Historical Perspective," *The Concord Journal*, 21 December 1995.

[4] William Ellery Channing, *Thoreau: The Poet Naturalist*, (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1873) pp. 1-2.

[5] Margaret Sidney, *Old Concord: Her Highways and Byways*, (Boston: D. Lathrop Co., 1888) p. 33.

[6] Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 26 May 1857.

Voices of Different Drummers

This column is dedicated to members' concerns. Please send your questions to the Society offices in Lincoln. We will respond to selected inquiries in future issues.

When is the annual meeting?
The 1996 annual meeting begins Thursday, July 11, with an evening reception at Concord Academy and concludes early Sunday evening, July 14.

How do I register to attend the annual meeting?
The Spring 1996 issue of The Thoreau Society Bulletin, which will be mailed in May, will contain a detailed schedule of activities and registration materials.

What events have been planned for the 1996 annual meeting?
Highlights of this years' activities include:

Friday, July 12

- Walking tour of Concord
- Our First Annual Dinner Gala

Saturday, July 13

- Coffee and donuts at First Parish Church in Concord
- Traditional meeting featuring keynote speaker Lawrence Buell (Harvard)
- Annual luncheon and Thoreau trivia quiz
- Afternoon excursion on the Concord River
- Panel discussions on Emerson and on Mt. Katahdin
- Tour of Thoreau Treasures at Concord Free Public Library
- Booksigning and refreshments at The Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond
- Saturday night talk and slide show on Brook Farm by Sterling F. Delano (Villanova U)

Sunday, July 14

- Walk up Pine Hill led by Walter Brain
- Tour of Brook Farm with Sterling F. Delano

Noteworthy

Please send your additions to the Thoreau bibliography to Tom Harris, The Thoreau Society, 44 Baker Farm, Lincoln, MA 01773.

We welcome your input. We are especially interested in Thoreau related articles about eight hundred words in length and any Thoreau relevant morsels discovered. Please send your comments, suggestions and articles to Deb Caton at our offices in Lincoln.

A portion of each bulletin, "Voices of Different Drummers," is reserved for your inquiries. Please send your questions to The Thoreau Society, Inc., 44 Baker Farm, Lincoln, MA 01773.

- Please carefully examine your address label and contact us with any corrections. We don't want you to miss any mailings.
- Make plans to attend the next Annual Meeting of The Thoreau Society, July 11 - 14, 1996, Concord, Massachusetts. Specific information on the gathering will be announced in the Spring 1996 issue .

"I do not see that I can live tolerably without affection for Nature."

Journal
January 23, 1858
Henry David Thoreau

Society Names New Director

[Editors' note: The following article is condensed from The Concord Journal of 15 February 1996.]

A woman with New England roots and worldwide experience has been chosen as the first permanent executive director of The Thoreau Society. Jeanne McNett, 49, a Massachusetts native, has returned to her home turf following a career in education and administration that has spanned the globe.

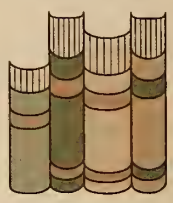
"This is my calling," said McNett during an interview on her first full day at the Society's Lincoln headquarters. "When you see the perfect job, you have to do it. It is a wonderful opportunity to serve." McNett, who holds a Ph.D. in English literature and an MBA in international business, said the combination has prepared her well for The Thoreau Society's ambitious agenda. She said she values Thoreau's message of simplicity and realizes his important place in American literature.

At the same time, she knows what it takes to raise money, initiate programs and manage operations. Thoreau Society President Joel Myerson said McNett was the board's unanimous choice. "One look at what she has done and you have to be impressed. She is committed to education in its broadest definition and will bring Thoreauvian ideals to the broadest number of people possible," he said in a telephone interview. "Although McNett is not specifically a Thoreau scholar," Myerson said, "she has a knowledge about what is important about Thoreau."

McNett said she is undaunted by the challenges ahead. A review of her résumé hints at why. Her 22 years of experience include contributions to the development of the first public university for women in Saudi Arabia and academic administration of the University of Maryland's Asian division with 9,000 students spread over 85 sites in eight countries. Most recently McNett served as a professor and a grant administrator at Morris College in South Carolina.

"I plan to take it very reasonably. I still have a lot to learn, and I trust members of the community will help me" she said. "We're offering Thoreau to the world, but one important piece is right here." Like Thoreau, McNett keeps a daily journal. "Doesn't everyone?" she asked, as she described the value of taking the time for reflection.

Additions to the Thoreau Bibliography



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Notes & Queries

- In April 1997, The Concord Museum's long awaited new history gallery will become a reality. In the planning stages since 1989, "Why Concord?," a major permanent exhibition and interpretive program, will provide an overview of Concord history from its Native American settlement to the present.
- The Walden Pond State Reservation and the Emerson Umbrella plan to celebrate Earth Day with a sunrise ceremony at Thoreau's cabin site. Scheduled to begin at 6 am, the event will include flute music and readings from Thoreau. Please call (508) 369-3254 for details.

Society WISH List

Volunteers: The Thoreau Society administrative office in Lincoln welcomes volunteers for general office help and assistance with special projects and events.

Office furniture and equipment: We are on the lookout for comfortable desk chairs, conference furniture and lamps.

"In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident."

Walden
Henry David Thoreau

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We started this bibliography with the first issue of the bulletin way back in 1941 and installments have appeared in more than 200 issues. Someone new will be taking it up now and we wish him luck with it. My thanks to the hundreds of members who have sent in material for it.

Sincerely,

Walter Harding

Additions to the Thoreau bibliography may be sent to Tom Harris at 44 Baker Farm, Lincoln, MA 01773, e-mail: ttsharris@aol.com.

In the Next Issue

- 1996 Annual Meeting calendar, details and registration materials
- Construction update on the new archives building at the Thoreau Institute
- Additional descriptions of the Society's collections

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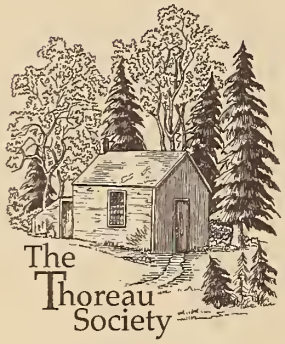

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